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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the problems of interpeting "Oedipus Rex" and argues that morality was not the primary question being raised in this play, nor was Sophocles urging people to humility and piety. Instead, Sophocles was primarily interested in the insufficiency of human knowledge. The gods and their role in destiny, the character and personality of Oedipus, Oedipus' tragic flaw, and the role of guilt in the play are discussed. It is concluded that, in this play, human reason was an exercise in futility, that the universe is ordered and things will be and happen as they will, and that human beings can observe and even help, but not really change anything within that order. (TS)

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ON TEACHING OEDIPUS REX:

A COMPROMISE INTERPRETATION

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CS 202 3/6

The beginnings of Greek history are vague. It is hard to decide when Greek history began and when it ended, since a high degree of civilization was attained by Greek-speaking people before the time of Homer, and continued for half a millennium after the loss of political indepencence.[1] Swiss historian, Jacob Burckhardt, views the problem philosphically, All beginnings are lost in obscurity...[2] In searching the literature for material on Sophocles and his works, the words of these historians become haunting. One finds that although certain biographical information is available, Sophocles, the man, is not greatly revealed other than through his works, which unfortunately were not totally preserved. Time has caused much to be lost. Perhaps these limitations of resource material account for the widely divergent views offered by scholars interpreting his works. Perhaps the works themselves are the source for the disagreement. Cedric Hubbell Whitman offers the following:

> Sophocles was an artist who hid his meanings under a glossy and almost impenetrable surface of simplicity. Like Dante and Goeth, he could wear the mask of orthodoxy; like Mozart, he could veil his human intensity in formal grace and refined brilliance. Beside his contemporary, Euripides, he has often seemed stiff and remote. Yet the most discriminating readers have always felt his inner fire, and since the fifth century B.C., scholars and men of letters have used all their philology and intuition to pierce his baffling exterior.[3]

Of his surviving work, it is generally agreed that the

greatest is Oedipus Rex. On this work too one finds widely divergent, and reasonably convincing, arguments. On one side of the argument we find that Sophocles was urging man to humility and piety in the face of irrationally evil gods; and on the other side we hear that morality was not a serious question for Sophocles in this play. C. M. Bowra speaks for the moralists: The central idea of a Sophoclean tragedy is that through suffering a man learns to be modest before the gods... When (the characters) are finally forced to see the truth, we know that the gods have prevailed and that men must accept their own insignificance.[4]

The opposite view is expressed by A. J. A. Waldock:

> We know little of Sophocles' religion. When we sum up what we know of his beliefs we find them meagre in number and depressingly commonplace in quality.... He believed that there are ups and downs in fortune, and that men are never secure.... There is religion in "Oedipus Tyrannus," but it is not all crucial in the drama.... There is no meaning in the "Oedipus Tyrannus." There is merely the terror of coincidence, and then, at the end of it all, our impression of man's power to suffer, and of his greatness because of his power.[5]

A compromise position may be that morality was not the primary question being raised in Oedipus, nor was Sophocles urging man to humility and piety, although that notion can be endorsed in a negative way. Sophocles was in Oedipus Rex primarily interested in the insufficiency of human

knowledge.

Any discussion of a 5th century Greek view of morality, humility, or piety would be incomplete without relating it to their everpresent gods and their role in Destiny. The Greek view embraces the same illogicality as the Christian view -- divine foreknowledge and human free will existing together. As in Oedipus, the foreknowledge of Oedipus' actions possessed by the gods does not detract from the independence of Oedipus' actions in the play, since it does not affect the decisions which produce the catastrophe. But this foreknowledge, made objective in the form of a prophecy, does affect the actions of Oedipus before the play begins.[6] This statement about the play may serve to illustrate the point that the Greek view does not, in this case, exclude free human action. The prophecy allows for the independent action of Oedipus, which, of course, fulfills it. This Greek view of Destiny is explained in broader terms by Karl Reinhardt, For Sophocles, as for the Greeks of an older time, fate in general is never a determinism but rather a spontaneous development of the power of the daemonic, even when it is prophesied and even when it is fulfilled through an order imminent in what happens in the world's course.[7] It would be a mistake, however, to underestimate the influence of gods in Oedipus. Samuel Johnson conceded their influence in the play as follows: That his (Oedipus) crimes and punishment

still seem disproportionate is not to be imputed as a fault to Sophocles, who proceeded only on the ancient and popular notion of Destiny; which we know to have been the basis of Pagan theology.[8]

That the Greeks themselves had fear for the workings of fate may be evidenced by the opening lines of Sophocles' Trachine, which he also used to close his Oedipus Rex.

> Look up on that last day always. Count no mortal happy till he has passed the final limit of his life secure from pain.[9]

Thus, a summary view of the Greek notion of Destiny would reveal a subtle interplay of the human and the divine ever moving toward a future seen by the gods, but not really determined by them, and of which the Greeks were sometimes fearful.

Oedipus is a curious mixture of a contemporary Greek ruler, yet a man apart from his time -- a man subordinate to the will of the gods, yet in conflict with them. At one glance we see Oedipus standing firm, a will of iron, moving in his own directions. Another view will see him cruelly punished, yet of questionable guilt. We can find the same kinds of curious mixtures in "The Theban Legend,"[10] the very source for the Oedipus Rex. The force of the legend is a combination of god and human will as it relates to god and human knowledge. These ingredients are basic also to the

play. But, in the play Sophocles very carefully arranged the material of the myth in such a way as to exclude the external factors in the life of Oedipus from the action of the play; which is not Oedipus' fulfillment of the prophecy, but his discovery that he has already fulfilled it.

The tragic hero of the play is a man of several dimensions. Perhaps his most striking characteristic is his passion for truth (knowledge). It is such a passion that leads him to the discovery of his own identity which is, of course, his catastrophe. From the beginning, when the Priest requests Oedipus to seek an answer for the blight on the city, we find that Oedipus had already sent Creon to Apollo in his Pythian temple.

OEDIPUS: You have not aroused me like a man from sleep; know that I have given many tears to this, gone many ways wandering in thought, but as I thought I found only one remedy and that I took... 69

Later, when Creon gives him the message from King Phoebus, after several questions to Creon about the command, Oedipus accepts the task of finding the murderer of Laius with some conviction:

OEDIPUS: I will bring this to light again... 133

We later see, in his exchange with Teiresias the prophet, that Oedipus is angered by delay in the information he seeks.

TEIRESIAS: I will say nothing further.
Against this answer let your temper rage
as wildly as you will.

OEDIPUS: Indeed I am
so angry I shall not hold back a jot
of what I think... 347

Perhaps this exchange can set the example for another aspect of Oedipus the man -- his impulsive intellect. Also, after he has angered Teiresias into telling him that he (Oedipus) is the plague on the land and the murderer of the King, his mind rejects the idea and he immediately suspects that Creon has made a plot against him.

OEDIPUS: Was this your own design or Creon's? 379

The matter of his integrity pervades the story-line and nourishes the plot. He lived by his decree, sought the truth, always, and accepted the tragic consequences even unto himself. He continually chooses action instead of safety.

There would seem some merit in describing Oedipus the man, to mentioning how his subjects viewed him. Were they respectful and honorable toward their king? The lines spoken by the priest in the beginning of the play would seem to indicate that the people viewed him as a great King and more.

PRIEST: We have not come as suppliants to this altar
because we thought of you as a God, but
rather judging you the first of men in all
chances of this life and when we mortals
have to do with more than man. 34

In our discussion of the play we will seek to allow the possibility that fate (the gods, etc.) was responsible for Oedipus' undoing; in which case, human knowledge (reason) could have had little effect on the outcome. We will allow too an opposing view, that Oedipus was himself responsible for his fate, also in which case his knowledge (reason) was insufficient

for him to avoid suffering.

already mentioned the source for Oedipus is "The Theban Legend." We find in the legend a series of prophecies by the gods, and a series of human reactions which attempt to thwart the prophecy. This is never really successfully done. As Watling explains the legend, "But still the word of Apollo -- and human compassion -- prevailed."[11] So from the very beginning, we find no way to avoid what the gods prophesize, and they did predict the fate of Oedipus.

Moreover, the lingering religious attitude of blood-for-blood law would seem to make Oedipus' escape from punishment out of the question. In the words of C. H. Whitman:

> ...it might be urged that Oedipus' crimes are more in the religious than purely legal or moral centax, and that therefore, whatever his motivating intention, Oedipus himself is just as "hateful to the gods' -- in the eyes, at least, of the ancient chthonian religion, with its blood-for-blood law, defended and exalted by daemonic hosts of Furies, with their attendant spirits, the Alastores and Miastures.[12]

Even the plague which causes Oedipus to begin his search for truth is the will of the gods. The chorus refers to the god responsible for the plague in line 215.

Another consideration is the Greek "hamartia" theory (tragic flaw), which again finds Oedipus punished through no fault of his own, but rather for a flaw in himself supplied by fate or chance.

These points, plus the Greek view of Destiny, would seem to suggest that the gods (fate) had decided from the legend

through the play that their prophecy would be fulfilled; in which case Oedipus' frantic search for truth, his honesty in motive, and his innocent will, possession of, human knowledge (reason) could not really change anything.

The argument which holds that Oedipus is responsible for his own destiny is personally more appealing, yet more difficult to understand. For although one can interpret Sophocles' play a number of ways, no one way that makes sense completely excludes the seemingly ever-present Greek view of Destiny -- which can have reduced roles of importance but not be excluded. One can, however, minimize the influence of the supernatural by pointing out that Oedipus forced and pulled the knowledge from the past that led to his downfall. His efforts were vigorous and fruitful. Even at these points when he was not certain how friendly certain information would be to him personally, he had to know. He could not be moved or in any way dissuaded. To him, knowledge was the ultimate value. He had to know! And once knowing the truth of his deeds, he loses confidence in the merits of reason and declares after he has blinded himself,

OEDIPUS: ...Well, let my
fate go where it will. 1459

So he (Oedipus) sought truth (knowledge), and found that once he had found it, he suffered the same fate as the Oedipus who was led to his destiny by the gods.

Although as we have seen it is possible to interpret Sophocles' play more than one way and that we can not find consistent textual evidence that Sophocles wished to hold Oedipus guilty or not. Nor can we conclude exactly how Sophocles viewed the supernatural. However, I do get a strong feeling that the possession of knowledge was in itself, for Sophocles through his play, quite meaningless, at least in terms of applying it to one's own fate for the purpose of altering it. Human reason was an exercise in futility. The universe is ordered (somehow) and things will be and happen as they will. Human beings can observe, and even help -- as instruments within that order -- but not really change. Oedipus didn't know the truth, and the prophecy was growing to its prediction. Oedipus later knew some of the facts and the prediction continued to grow. Oedipus ultimately learned the entire truth and the prophecy was fulfilled. Nothing really changed, and Oedipus' acquisition of knowledge altered nothing.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Truesdell S. Brown, Ancient Greece (New York: The Free Press 1965), p. 1.

[2]Jacob Burckhardt, History of Greek Culture (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1963), p. 3. Translated by Palmer Hilty.

[3]Cedric Hubbell Whitman, Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humanism (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1951), preface.

[4]C. M. Bowra, Sophoclean Tragedy (London: Oxford University Press, 1944), pp. 365-66.

[5]A. J. A. Waldock, Sophocles the Dramatist (London: Cambridge University Press, 1951), pp. 167-68.

[6]Bernard M. W. Knox, Oedipus at Thebes (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1957), pp. 38-9.

[7]Karl Reinhardt, Sophokles (Frankfurt: Klostermann Verlag, 1933). Translated by Carol R. Cook and Albert Cook in, Albert Cook, ed., Oedipus Rex: A Mirror for Greek Drama (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1965), p. 97.

[8]Thomas Maurice, from "Preface," (unsigned) to Poems and Miscellaneous Pieces (London: n.p., 1779). Cited in Albert Cook, ed., Oedipus Rex: A Mirror for Greek Drama, p. 85.

[9]David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, eds., Sophocles I: Oedipus The King (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1954). Translated by David Grene. All quotes from the text of the play will come from this translation unless otherwise noted.

[10]For a brief reading of the legend see, E. F. Watling, "The Theban Legend," in Sophocles: The Theban Plays (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, Inc., 1964), pp. 23-4. Translated by E. F. Watling.

[11]Ibid, p. 23

[12]Cedric Hubbell Whitman, Op. Cit., p. 128.

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